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SUBJECT: GAME ON - OR GAME OVER? - FOR THE CSU IN THE  
EUROPEAN PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS

Classified By: Consul General Eric Nelson for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: Days before the June 7 European Parliament elections in Germany, the Christian Social Union (CSU) is at a deciding moment in its history as a powerful regional party in Germany and in Europe, and the German political establishment is on tenterhooks. Voters do not seem to be as engaged, which is a sign of the times, and typical for the European Parliament elections. The CSU campaign focuses on why Bavarians need the CSU -- self-styled defender of Bavarian interests -- to be in Strasbourg taking care of Bavaria. The CSU's failure to stay in the EU Parliament could mortally wound Europe's erstwhile most-powerful regional party, severely jeopardize CSU standing vis-a-vis the sister Christian Democratic Union party (CDU) just four months before the German Bundestag election. End Summary.

CSU,s Downward Slide  
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¶2. (SBU) For decades, the EU elections in Bavaria were predictable. Despite a low voter turnout, the CSU would win between 55 and 65 percent of the vote, which put them over the five percent national threshold and assured it mandates in the EU Parliament. Following the CSU's September 2008 election debacle in which it lost its 50-year absolute majority rule in Bavaria, the CSU may not be able to recoup its losses to prevent a further slide. The CSU now fears the trend will continue and the traditional party base may fail to give enough support on June 7 to keep the party in the Parliament.

¶3. (SBU) The Free Democratic Party (FDP), the CSU's coalition partner, could attract some disaffected CSU voters or undecideds, as they did in the September 2008 elections. But the biggest threat to the CSU comes from the Freie Waehler (FW, Independents), also conservative and the CSU's number one rival in Bavaria. Their surprise win of ten percent of the vote in September 2008 came after they stole half of the CSU's base, the rural, conservative, farm vote. Recent opinion polls have shown that these same voters are currently split between continued support of the CSU and a protest vote for the FW, with CSU support hovering around a low 25 percent. Frustration over falling farm incomes and high farm expenses is water on the mill of the FW. Political observers have little doubt that the FW will fail to win five percent of the vote Germany-wide since they are not eligible in all German states. However, the CSU runs only in Bavaria. The fear is that disenchantment with the CSU combined with a protest vote for the FW could cost the CSU the five percent minimum.

And Turnout Slides as Well  
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¶4. (C) Fears aside, opinion polls are unclear about the election because of uncertainty over the turnout. From a high of 60 percent in 1979, turnout fell to 39.7 in 2004 when

the CSU got 57.4 percent of the vote in Bavaria. This translated to eight percent nationally, well over the needed five percent. This year, some observers say turnout could be further depressed because many voters will be on vacation on June 7, in the middle of a two-week holiday period. However, Christian Kattner, a senior CSU functionary, told the Consul General on June 3 that it seems absentee ballots are up 40% over the last EU election, a fact that cheered the CSU leadership. Most people assume that a CSU result of 43.4 percent, mirroring the 2008 state elections, or just 40 percent, would be enough in the national mix to spell success.

CSU,s Good Ole Boys May Need Change  
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15. (SBU) Officially, CSU politicians convey optimism about CSU chances. The CSU campaign has resurrected old slogans that worked before: no EU membership for Turkey; direct support measures for Bavarian farmers; subsidiarity for EU decision making. They now also support the introduction of public referenda in Germany on major EU issues, a suggestion at odds with the CDU. Minister President Seehofer has also tried to make the CSU appear younger and more female oriented. His insistence on running Monika Hohlmeier, daughter of the legendary former MP Franz Josef Strauss, may draw a few more people to the polls.

16. (C) In private conversations with the Consul General and Poloff, however, two CSU leaders admitted serious doubts and criticized the party's approach. Deputy CSU Secretary

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General Dorothea Baer, one of Minister President Seehofer's new young guard told us that she was far less optimistic about June 7 than most of her party friends. Likewise, at another private meeting, Justice Minister Beate Merk, unique in CSU circles as a clear-speaking "liberal," single and childless leader, angrily complained that the CSU was "failing utterly" to capture new, especially female, voters. She said that the leadership and base still viewed women in the stifling, patriarchal way, wholly inconsistent with the varied roles that single mothers, working women, and other women take today.

Comment  
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17. (C) Bavarians are frustrated with politics and distracted by the economic crisis. Even though Bavarian unemployment is still about half the national average, Bavaria's auto and machine tool industries are suffering, as are the farmers in general. Bavarians are also tired of election campaigns after municipal and state elections last year and Bundestag elections coming in September. Although Bavaria is a net economic winner from EU expansion, the "nationalistic" Bavarians are skeptical of an EU whose governance seems to them to disregard the regions. At this point, we expect the CSU will just get the votes it needs to reach the five percent threshold Germany-wide. Should it fail to do so, however, there are rough times ahead for the CSU in the imminent national election campaign. End comment.

18. (U) Consulate General Munich coordinated this cable with Embassy Berlin.  
NELSON